



# LEARNING FROM FAILURE 2020

## What CARE's evaluations tell us about how to improve our work

### Introduction

Part of striving for the deepest and most sustainable impact at the biggest scale possible is understanding what doesn't work. CARE's commitment not only to the highest quality programming, but also to continual improvement, drives us to celebrate our successes and to examine our failures. In 2019, CARE published our first [Learning From Failure](#) report, where we looked at what project evaluations told us was going wrong, and areas where we can strengthen our programming to improve our impact. By analyzing broader trends across several projects CARE can get a broader sense of systemic weaknesses that lead to failures in specific cases. We pair this with our [podcast with individual case studies](#) where we look at specific examples of failures and how to address them so we can illustrate trends with illustrative examples. That gives us the space to make bigger strategic changes to address underlying causes of failure and support teams to improve work at all levels. One example of this is targeting CARE's investments in Monitoring Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) systems and capacity building to address common failures we found. In 2020, we repeated the analysis to see where we are improving, and where we still need work.

This research demonstrates where we need to improve. It highlights common trends among issues that evaluators identify as failures that made project implementation slower, less efficient, or less impactful than they could have been. It gives us an opportunity to reinforce our systems to strengthen areas where many teams struggle. **The research does not imply that the projects represented in it are failures. Of the 206 evaluations in this sample, 194 projects met 80% or more of their impact and outcome targets.** Examining even successful projects for common challenges provides critical information to shape our strategies in coming years.

This second round of analysis shows us where we have improved, and where recommendations and investments from our first report paid off. It also shows us where we have opportunities to continue improving our work.

### What is Failure?



For the purposes of this report, failure is **foreseeable or preventable challenges identified in a project evaluation that were within the project's control** to at least some extent. This may have resulted in delays, inefficiencies, friction between partners, or other challenges that made it harder to deliver project activities and impacts on time. The analysis does not define failure as a failure to deliver on project activities, outcomes, or impacts over the entire

life of the project. Indeed, 94% of projects in the sample met at least 80% of their activity or outcome goals. Additionally, this research does not define failure as the more common “challenges” criteria, which often includes conditions outside of a project’s control, such as an earthquake or a sudden onset conflict.

Because this report draws from evaluations, the failures are entirely based on the evaluator’s perspective on challenges that warranted attention in a final report. This leaves room for bias, and for different perspectives across a range of evaluators, evaluations and contexts. It may also leave gaps in the analysis if the evaluator was not looking at certain areas or was not expert enough to judge failure in a particular topic.

## How are we analyzing failure?

### Methodology

In 2019, we [reviewed 114 evaluations](#) CARE published between January of 2015 and September of 2018 to identify the most common failures evaluators identified. Using [MAXQDA](#), we conducted a qualitative analysis with a pre-defined list of categories to see where we made the most mistakes. In round 2, we reviewed 92 evaluations dated between October 2018 and February 2020 using the same methods to see what had changed. For this second round, we made two important changes to the methodology. First, building on learning from round one, we simplified the list of possible codes to better capture trends and to reflect what we learned in the first round.

Second, rather than counting the percentage of projects where a failure occurred, we looked at the percentage of failures each category represents. In the 2019 analysis, each project could only report a single category one time—giving a percent of projects that showed that category of failure. In 2020, each individual failure counts toward the total, even if one project has two failures in the same category. This gives us a better sense of the magnitude of each challenge, and a better point of comparison year over year. In order to compare trends across time, we re-categorized data from round 1 to match the coding and analysis methods in round 2. For the top 5 areas of failure, we have continued to show the percent of projects that demonstrated this failure.

### Limitations

This data draws primarily from final evaluations, which shows us a retrospective look at what is changing. It does not provide real-time snapshots of where teams are struggling. This means there is a lag in the data, and investments in improving quality and systems do not show up immediately. To take one example, almost all of the projects in round 2 of the meta-analysis were designed before 2019. This implies that CARE did not have the opportunity to apply the learning about design from round 1 to the projects in round 2. We will not see returns on those investments until at least the next round of meta-analysis. A second limitation is that the individuals doing the qualitative coding changed between round 1 and round 2. While we made every effort to ensure consistency across the coding, there is inevitably some variation in perception between reviewers that may have contributed to changes over time.

## Where are our biggest challenges in 2020?

In 2020, our biggest failure out of 39 possible codes were **missing key inputs** (12% of overall failures)—which often occurs with agricultural inputs or supplies for health centers. This often points to a need to improve our market analysis and what is available or required in local markets, and the connections between our procurement systems and our programmatic needs and vision to ensure we have the right inputs at the right time. Input failures showed up in 42% of projects.

Another common failure was around **understanding the context**. This accounted for 12% of total failures and appeared in 43% of projects. Most often, this is related to project startup and design. It points to a critical need not only to do thorough analysis during design and early in implementation, but also to apply learning and a consistent understanding of shifting context throughout the life of the project. It reinforces a critical need for adaptive management and the application of learning and context analysis throughout the life of project.

### Examples: Missing Key Inputs

“...the agricultural calendar is seasonal, and the [project] sometimes delivered seeds out of season. A woman explained: “We did not plant them [immediately] because they brought them out of the planting season, so we kept them in our yards to plant the next season, but they dried up [so we could no longer use them].”

“stockout of the selected essential supplies and equipment was observed in about 19 percent of [health centers] assessed. This means some health catchment communities are still deprived of quality routine services in the intervention zones.”

### Examples: Understanding the Context

“The patchy cell phone access in the project areas limited the efficacy of the telephone helpline as beneficiaries had to travel to public call offices in town to make complaints, which was especially difficult for women.”

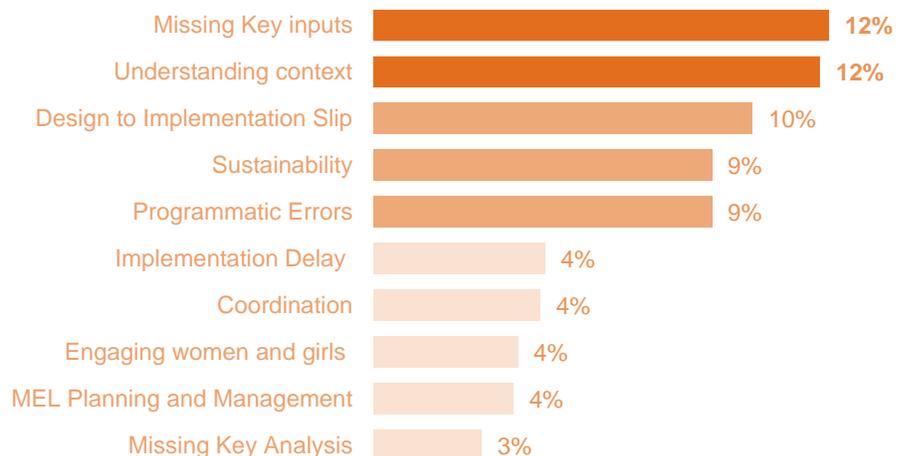
“The variety proposed were not adopted due to their low-level marketability, as the interest of farmers points to the corn market pushed by China, and as most of the farmers were already engaged with Chinese traders.”

**Design to implementation slip**—when we did not implement activities as designed—often occurred either because of unrealistic project design and budgets, or as a result of a rapidly shifting context. This was 10% of total failures, and was a failure cited in 40% of projects. Because changing project activities to align with context could be a positive example of adaptive management, the examples included in this set are only ones where a failure to adapt to a changing context made it impossible to implement activities effectively, and the project could not find a reasonable alternative. This points to a need for both more realistic project plans, and for better capacity and incentives to monitor and adapt as the project context changes.

**Sustainability failures** are most commonly a result of not planning for sustainability from the beginning of a project. This represented

9% of total failures, appearing in 40% of projects). Evaluators often point out that a modest number of handover activities in the last six months of a project are not enough to ensure sustainability in the long term. True sustainability requires intentional design from the beginning of the project. Another common failure in sustainability is that teams do not plan for the financial sustainability after the project is over, even if there is a plan to share training manuals or activities to a local actor.

### 10 Most Common Failures 2018-2020



**Programmatic errors** represent a broad range of challenges, from training sessions that tried to cover too many issues in too short a time, to selecting business activities for participants that did not pay off soon enough to motivate people to continue with the activity. In some cases, it also represented an over-rigid approach to implementing project design without allowing for the flexibility and context-specific adaptation communities needed to benefit from the programming. These errors were 9% of total failures across 31% of projects.

For these top 5 areas of failure, there is some slight variation across sectors. For example, humanitarian programming shows these 5 failures in the same order as the global trends, but in Food and Water Systems, understanding context is slightly more common (14%) than missing key inputs (11%). However, across almost all sectors, these core areas are consistently in the top 7 categories of failure. This is also true when we analyze failure by region; there is some variation in the exact order, but the same failures show up as the priority areas in almost all regions.

## Where are we getting better?

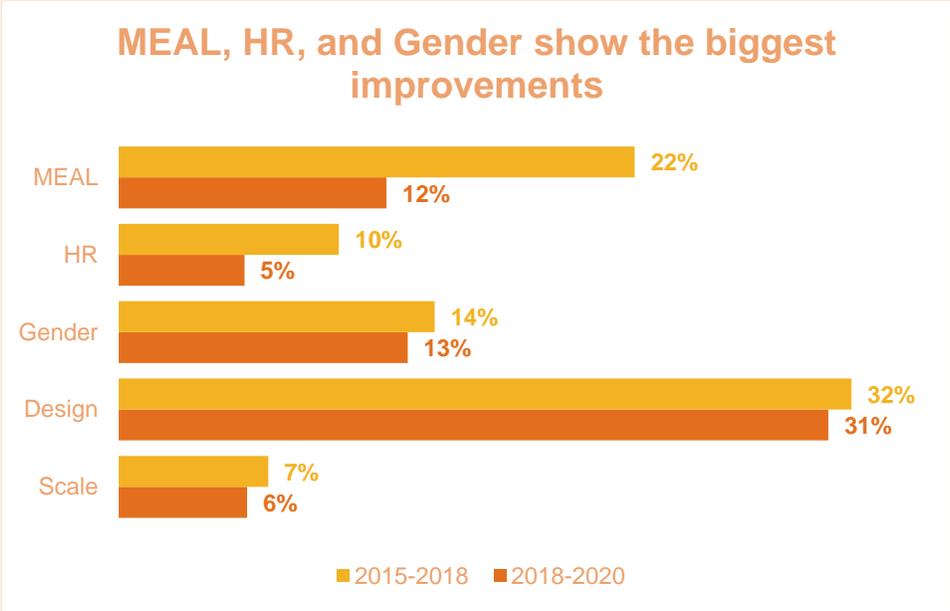
Using the learning from the 2019 analysis, CARE proposed a series of recommendations to reinforce areas where we saw common failures across projects. These included:

- **Invest in project design**—including investing more in rigorous context analysis, building in more sustainability planning early on, and being very targeted and streamlined in getting the right activities for a project. After the first round of learning from failure, CARE worked with project design teams on the biggest projects to re-do program design standards and processes, and hosted new design trainings for people involved in writing proposals. We also invested more in designing for adaptive management in 2019, including publishing new guidance on adaptive management.
- **Follow through on MEAL standards**—to reinforce skills and planning around Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL), as well as more proactively manage partnerships around MEAL. Since the recommendations came out in 2019, CARE has invested in either in-person or virtual MEAL trainings for almost all country offices, and is currently rolling out a new set of online modules to reinforce this work. Data on how all projects are applying key MEAL standards is also now being gathered on an annual basis through CARE's Project and Program Information and Impact System (PIIRS). It is important to note that the 2019 recommendations built on an organization-wide investment in strengthening MEAL and staff MEAL skills that launched in 2016 through a range of trainings, improving systems, and building leadership commitment to using data for decision-making at all levels. That 2016 investment has grown in scope and continues in CARE's investments. It has included building new data systems, launching organization-wide MEAL trainings, and investing in global teams to support MEAL across the federation.
- **Reinforce gender commitments**—because gender equality is at the heart of CARE's work, we recommended reinforcing key areas around gender, including conducting better gender analysis, focusing more on structural barriers to gender equality, and ensuring we were working with women and girls. This also continues a longstanding CARE commitment and organizational investments in gender equality work across the federation. CARE also conducted a specific gap analysis around gender and MEAL, and reinvested in trainings and gender analysis across the federation.
- **Support, manage, and develop staff**—because HR failures represented 10% of project failures in round 1 of data analysis, the first learning from failure report recommended reinforcing HR systems—especially in hiring and recruiting the right staff for the job, and investments in management skills.

As part of our action plan from the 2019 analysis, we also disaggregated all failure data by region and by sector. That allowed us to present tailored analysis to relevant teams at CARE that could address these issues through the projects and proposals they currently work on. These tailored presentations gave teams a sense of where they could take specific actions.

In order to see if we have improved in any core areas between the 2019 and 2020 analysis, we grouped the 39

possible failure codes explored above into ten overarching categories—including: Implementation, Design, Gender, MEAL, Partnership, Scale, Human Resources, Budget, Unintended Consequences, and Technology. These broader categories give us a clearer sense of how to connect organizational investments to systemic changes, both in terms of what has worked and in terms of where we need to improve. The broader categories connect more clearly to organizational owners and clearly defined parts of the project cycle, making it easier to propose recommendations and action steps moving forward.



Between round 1 and round 2 of the *Learning From Failure* analysis, there were statistically significant improvements in MEAL—as measured by a reduction in the percentage of failures related to MEAL (from 22% to 12%). There is also a reduction in HR-related failures, from 10% to 5%. Based on the project cycles of the data represented in this analysis, it is likely that improvements in MEAL scores are the investments from 2016-2018 paying off, and that

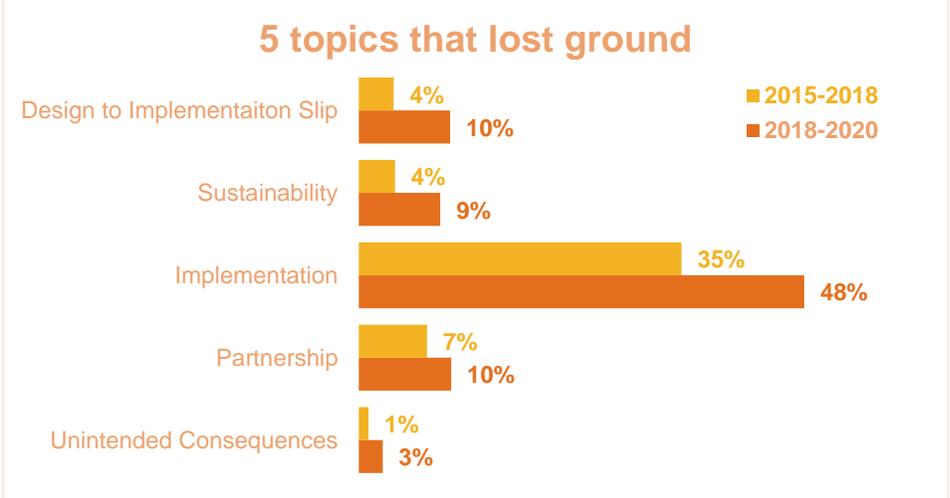
investments that have come since the 2019 learning from failures analysis will continue to reduce this number.

There were more modest improvements in gender, design, and scale, although these are not statistically significant improvements across the sample.

**It is also important to note that while design showed modest improvement, it is still one of the most common areas of failure across all of the evaluations in the sample.** This is one area where investments in improved project design and capacity building around project design would not have paid off between round 1 and round 2 of meta-analysis because looking at project evaluations makes this a lagging indicator, often looking at projects designed 3-5 years previously.

### Where do we still need to improve?

Between round 1 and round 2 of the analysis, certain areas started to show up more often as failures. Partly this



reflects increasing focus on those areas in evaluations themselves. Sustainability is a good example of this, as it has become an increasing focus of all of CARE's work—and consequently our evaluations. It is also possible that areas such as implementation or design to implementation slip are reflecting an increasingly uncertain operating context across both humanitarian and development contexts. Those

categories of failure could point to a need to invest more in adaptive management and monitoring systems that allow projects to identify and react to challenges as soon as they happen.

**Implementation continues to be the biggest area of failure and has increased as a percentage of failures since the first round of analysis.** It is a broad category that covers a range of issues—from the quality of trainings to issues with input supplies. The five most common failures from the 2020 meta-analysis all fall into the category of implementation, and many of them now represent a bigger percentage of failures than they did in round 1. Because implementation is such a broad category, it proved difficult to tackle with targeted recommendations. **Additionally, the key recommendations on implementation quality from 2019 were about handover between project design and project implementation teams and strengthening project startup.** Because those activities happen early in the life of a project, any positive results from additional investments will not have shown up yet.

## What should we do next?

Implementation failures represent the largest percentage of failures in the 2020 round of analysis. Even if an artifact of the analysis design means we are examining projects that have not yet benefitted from improvements in implementation, we need to do more focused work improving implementation quality. While projects often successfully deliver results despite implementation failures—which teams often correct over the life of a project—implementation failures reduce the scale, speed, and efficiency with which we achieve impact.

**Despite improvements in the past 2 years, MEAL, Gender, and Design continue to represent 3 of the 4 most common failures across CARE's work.** The evidence suggests that current investments are improving the situation. For areas like MEAL, which show high improvement, additional investments to improve the work started even before the first learning from failures analysis and continued to expand and adapt based on the first round of meta-analysis. We should continue and extend those investments to push for even more transformation. This is especially true for investments in gender equality.

Sustainability is another key area for investment and improvement in the coming years. It is one of the areas that continues to be a common failure, and became a larger percentage of failures in round 2 than it was in round 1. CARE is making investments in research about sustainability factors, and the results of that research can help inform future organization-wide sustainability planning.

Based on this learning from failure, we propose four recommendations to continuously improve our impact and effectiveness:

- **Better understand the biggest implementation challenges:** we can further investigate the biggest implementation challenges using the finer detail of the coded sections of evaluations. This will allow us to better target specific failures within implementation—such as the way we address issues around inputs, and how we ensure teams understand the context where they operate.
- **Tailor specific regional and sector actions plans:** While we did present tailored 2019 failure analysis to many project and region specific teams, the recommendations and action plans remained at the global level. With the 2020 analysis, we need to not only present tailored findings to each relevant team, we need to customize action plans and recommendations to each team so they can take forward the actions that are most relevant to them.
- **Continue to invest in design:** design continues to be a major area of failure, and investments in project design have not yet paid off. We must continue to strengthen our design process, as well as to accelerate our investments and improvements in applying our learning to projects that are currently in design.
- **Focus on adaptive management:** It is clear that projects need to work not only on good project design at the beginning of a project, but also applying learning and adaptive management throughout the life of the project. This involves not only understanding the changing contexts, but also understanding when activities are not working or could deliver more effectively. Adaptive management applies not just to project activities, but also to functional areas like budget, partnerships, and human resources.